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What is “the mean relative to us” in Aristotle’s Ethics?

LESLEY BROWN

It is well known that in his *Ethics* – both the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian* – Aristotle describes *ēthikē aretē*, excellence of character, as involving a “mean relative to us”; he distinguishes this from a “mean in respect of the object” (*meson kat’ auto to pragma*).¹ In NE II 6 he explains this distinction with the help of an example drawn from athletic training, featuring a trainer and two athletes, the mighty Milo and a novice, saying that whereas the mean in the object is always the same, the midpoint, the “mean relative to us” is not one and the same *pasin* (for all, or in all cases).

This paper argues that Aristotle’s point has been widely misunderstood. On the strength of the label “relative to us” together with the quoted phrase “not one and the same for all” and the Milo example, it has been generally assumed that “relative to us” means “relative to the individual” understood as the individual agent, and that Aristotle holds that in some way or other *ēthikē aretē* is agent-relative, and may be different for you from what it is for me.² What in most authors is a widespread but unquestioned assumption has recently been defended at length by Stephen

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¹ NE 1106a28; also (next line) *meson tou pragmatos*, “mean of the object,” and, at EE 1220b23, *meson pros allēla* “mean with respect to each other.” “Thing” would be perhaps a preferable translation to “object” which has some theoretical overtones and could suggest a misleading contrast with the subject, but I retain “object” to cohere with the Irwin translation which I quote.

² I refer to and sketch in note 12 some accounts given by commentators. Here I note some other appearances of the interpretation I reject:

– GERLLloyd, “The role of medical and biological analogies in Aristotle’s ethics” *Phronesis* 1968, p. 82; “the notion that the mean is relative to individuals yet not indeterminate.”

– WFRHardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory*, whose generally helpful account corrects Joachim (n. 12), nonetheless writes that the doctrine conveyed by this passage is “that the ethical mean must be appropriate to circumstances including facts about the agent himself,” p. 135. Though the doctrine is unobjectionable (see end of II below), I deny that Aristotle is making any claim about facts about the agent in this passage or with the label “relative to us.”

Leighton.³ I shall argue that “the mean relative to us” should be explained not as “relative to individuals” (and *a fortiori* not as “relative to individual agents”), but as “relative to us as human beings,” and that Aristotle uses the phrase to convey a normative notion, the notion of something related to human nature, needs or purposes, and which is the object of a certain kind of expertise and judgement. This reading has several advantages, the chief being that it makes far better sense of Aristotle’s overall account of *ēthikē aretē*, as I explain in section I. In II I consider various ways in which the mean could be thought to be relative to individual moral agents, but find none of them convincing. In III I argue that a careful reading of the Milo example shows that it has been misinterpreted, that it is not Milo and the novice who are the analogues of moral agents, but the trainer, who has to judge the diet appropriate to each of his charges. If the moral agent is compared to the trainer, then the appropriate action-cum-feeling is no more relative to the agent than the appropriate diet is relative to the trainer. The twenty or so lines of NE II 6 which have been the source of so much talk of a mean relative to the individual agent should rather be read as contrasting two kinds of expertise and the type of *meson* at which they aim, as I explain below.

– Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (1989), p. 37 appears to assume the interpretation “relative to individual agents” when she writes: “Indeed how is knowing what is the mean “relative to me” . . . helpful to knowing what is the mean relative to someone else?”

– Sandra Peterson, “*Horos* (Limit) in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Phronesis* 1988, p. 236f., includes in her statement of the conditions of an action’s being what ought to be done that it be done “by an agent who has chosen the middle or intermediate – that is the middle for the agent in the acting situation . . .” and explicitly derives the qualification “for the agent” from 1106a36-b7.

– R. Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (1989), p. 328: <Aristotle> “points out that the mean for one person in one situation will differ from the mean for another person in a different situation (1106a26-b7).” Kraut’s elaboration leaves it unclear whether he really finds Aristotle advocating agent-relativity as well as relativity to situation.

³ S. Leighton “Relativising Moral Excellence in Aristotle” in *Apeiron* 1992, 49-66. Leighton labels his interpretation “attribute relativism,” claiming that excellence is relative to subjects, viz. to “who they are.” He acknowledges difficulties for his view (60, 61) which I believe are more serious than he allows. In common with many other writers he misreads (in my view) the point of the Milo illustration (on which see sec III) and bases his “attribute relativism” largely on this misreading (see 51-55).

– Peter Losin, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean” in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 4.3 1987, 329-341 also defends the interpretation I challenge: I discuss some of his claims in IIb below.

I

Here, in Irwin's translation (adapted), is the beginning of the relevant passage, NE 1106a26-32:

In everything continuous and divisible it is possible to take⁴ more, less and equal, and each of them either in the object itself or relative to us; and the equal is some intermediate (*meson*) between excess and deficiency. By the intermediate in the object I mean what is equidistant from each extremity, this is one and the same for all. But relative to us the intermediate is what is neither superfluous nor deficient;⁵ this is not one, and is not the same for everyone. (For the sequel see III.)

To grasp Aristotle's point it is vital to note some double meanings which a translation cannot capture. There is the double use of the Greek comparative whereby it can mean both "more F" and "too F," and a matching double use both of the Greek *ison*, which can mean both (descriptively) equal and (normatively) fair or right, and of the Greek *meson*.⁶ The heart of the distinction between the two kinds of *meson* is the contrast between a non-normative and a normative notion. The "*meson* in the object," the *ison* in the sense of equal, is the midpoint, lying between what is more than half and what is less than half. This is contrasted with that which lies between what is *too much*⁷ and what is *too little*, that which is *ison* in the sense of right or appropriate,⁸ and *meson* in a normative or evaluative sense. This is explained in lines 29-32, with the help of the idea that the *meson* "relative to us" is what neither goes too far (*pleonazei*) nor falls short. The descriptive, arithmetical, *meson* is the midpoint, which is

⁴ *esti labein*: Irwin has "we can take," but the use of "we" here and later in the passage (see n. 16) suggests the misleading idea of agent-relativity which I shall argue is absent.

⁵ or: what neither goes too far (*pleonazei*) nor falls short.

⁶ *meson* in its most basic use means "middle" or "intermediate"; in its normative use it means something like "intermediate and correct," or more simply "appropriate." I have retained the traditional translation "mean," using "mean state" for *mesotēs*. Irwin renders *mesotēs* by "mean," and uses "intermediate" for *meson*, but this cannot capture the normative sense which the word undoubtedly had in some uses.

⁷ *pleon* meaning "too much" rather than simply "more" is a crucial element in *pleonexia*, often (but misleadingly) translated "greed." It is a desire not just for more than you already have or more than someone else, but a desire for too much relative to some norm, i.e. for *more than your fair share*, or *more than you are entitled to*.

⁸ A good example of the double use of *ison* can be found in the discussion of justice, NE V, where at 1131a11-12 *ison* and *anison* mean "fair" and "unfair," while at a22-24 they mean "equal" and "unequal" ("quarrels arise either when equals get unequal shares or when unequals get equal shares").

one and the same for any given extension; the normative *meson*, the right or appropriate point, is not the same for all (*oude tauton pasin*): it is this clause, and the Milo illustration which follows, which have given rise to what I regard as the mistaken view. In III I give my own account, but now, to follow the point that the distinction Aristotle focusses on is that between descriptive (more, less, midpoint) and normative (too much, too little, right or appropriate), I rehearse some familiar elements in his account of *ēthikē aretē* which, I believe, are hard to square with the thesis that *ēthikē aretē* may differ for different agents.

The familiar elements are these. The idea that *ēthikē aretē* is a mean state is cashed by Aristotle in the following way: in feelings and actions one should avoid too much and too little and aim for the “mean and best” (1106b22). (Thus both *hexeis*, states or dispositions, and the responses (actions and feelings) which arise from them, are labelled “mean.”) This is explained as feeling and acting when one should, about what one should, to whom one should, why one should etc. Thus the normativity of the second *meson* is here spelled out explicitly, and it also becomes clear that to manifest *ēthikē aretē*, to hit the mean thanks to one’s excellence of character, requires getting a lot of things right, not just one. What counts as getting them right will depend on the situation, which may warrant (for example) considerable fear or none at all, and call for different actions on different occasions.⁹ Though some general guidelines may be given, fully detailed prescriptions are often either unavailable or unsuitable for moral guidance; hence the need for the experienced judgement (linked with perception at NE 1109a14-23) to discern what is called for within the many parameters.

Accordingly we have the famous definition of excellence of character (NE 1106b36) as a disposition to choose, being in a mean state (a *mesotēs*) which is mean relative to us, determined by reason, i.e. by that reason by which the *phronimos*, the person of practical wisdom, would determine it. This crucial role of the *phronimos*, recalled in an equally important passage at the opening of NE VI, is, I believe, impossible to square with the usual interpretation of the “mean relative to us” in terms of relativity to individual moral agents. It suggests that to manifest *ēthikē aretē* is to feel and act in a given situation, the way the *phronimos* would feel and act in

⁹ I take no sides in the debate whether Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean involves, over and above the appeal to what is appropriate, some counsel of moderation (denied by Urmson, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean” in A. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, affirmed by R. Kraut, *Aristotle and the Human Good*, p. 339).

that situation. If so, it cannot be the case that *êthikê aretê* is relative to agents as well as relative to the situation. Since Aristotle includes in the one definition of *êthikê aretê* both elements – a) that *êthikê aretê* involves a mean relative to us and b) that that is determined by the *logos*, (reason/rational principle) by which the *phronimos* would determine it –, we must understand the former in such a way that it chimes with, not against, the latter.¹⁰

A further point (noted by Leighton, p. 60) is that when Aristotle comes to discuss the individual virtues, there is no sign of any doctrine that they are relative to, and different for, different agents. Aristotle has a lot to say about the myriad ways of falling short (or going beyond) the various excellences; indeed it has seemed to many that his emphasis on the many possible ways to go wrong is hard to reconcile with the idea that each excellence of character lies between just two vices, one of excess and one of defect. But I find no suggestion in the ethical works that each excellence itself is multiple, being different for different types of person.¹¹ Where many *types* of a virtue are discussed, such as courage, Aristotle makes clear that even so only one is true courage. If Aristotle had intended to make excellence of character differ for different agents, one would have expected some elaboration of this in the discussion of the individual excellences, but I find no sign of it there.

II

The above arguments – from the centrality of the *phronimos* in the definition of *êthikê aretê* and from the lack of reference, in his discussions of the individual excellences, to excellence being relative to us i.e. different for different agents – may seem swift and unconvincing. I now spell out various ways in which *êthikê aretê* has been or might be thought to vary according to individual agents.¹² I reject all of them, except the last which, I suggest, should not really be seen as a kind of agent-relativity.

¹⁰ Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, vol. I, p. 501 comments “The reference to the *phronimos* [sc. in the definition of *êthikê aretê*] as an impersonation of the “law” or “standard” of reason is a necessary modification of what would else be an entirely relative, individual and arbitrary theory of virtue.” *Contra* Grant I hold that the inclusion is no such modification, for the theory was never in danger of being “relative, individual or arbitrary.” But Grant’s comment shows that he sensed a tension in this definition imposed by the standard (but wrong) interpretation of “relative to us.”

¹¹ Such a claim is made in *Politics*; I discuss this in IIc below.

¹² The following is a sample of those who (in my view) misinterpret the passage, with more or less serious results.

a) “*The mean varies according to one’s stage of moral progress.*” To those who assume (wrongly, as I argue below) that in the Milo example we are to see Milo and the novice athlete as analogues of different moral agents, the following will suggest itself. “More is expected of the fully developed moral agent (the Milo type) than of the beginner in moral training; what is best and right for the expert may not be right for the beginner. So *êthikê aretê* for the expert is different from what it is for the tyro,

– Stewart, *Notes on Nicomachean Ethics*, vol. I, pp. 193-4: “The *meson pros hêmas*, with which alone we have to do in morals, is . . . that which enables a particular person to correspond successfully with his social environment.” “it is clear then that to *meson pros hêmas* although it has a quantitative aspect is essentially what is qualitatively suitable to the moral character in the circumstances in which it is placed.”

This may suggest a) or b) below.

– H.H. Joachim *Commentary on the Nic Eth*, p. 88: “How much – how great an intensity of *pathos* – ought you to feel on a given occasion? Not one and the same amount on all occasions, – nor one and the same amount as that felt by other agents” [the second point cannot be right, let alone not being what Aristotle is claiming] . . . The rule may be formulated thus: “As the nature and the circumstances of a given agent AB are to the nature of the *phronimos*, the man of practical wisdom, under such-and-such determinate circumstances, so must x (the amount of pathos which AB ought to embody in this act), be to the amount of *pathos* embodied by the *phronimos* acting under those determinate circumstances” . . . “The *phronimos* corresponds to the normally healthy man in the rule of the trainer. He is the normal, ideally good agent . . .”

Joachim’s rather obscure comments make it clear that he fails to see that the moral agent is equated to the trainer, not to “the man in the rule of the trainer.” They also show that he adopts something like suggestion a) or b), in his contrast between the agent’s passions and those of the *phronimos*.

– R. Gauthier and J. Jolif, *L’Ethique à Nicomaque*, II, 1, p. 138 represent the contrast between the two kinds of *meson* as that between a *milieu objectif* and a *milieu subjectif*, and claim (p. 146) of *le milieu subjectif des passions et des actions* that it is *unique pour un individu déterminé*. Though they use the misleading term *subjectif*, they do not espouse the subjectivism of suggestion d), but speak of “that which conforms exactly to the needs of the subject.”

– J.L. Ackrill, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, p. 248 explains “relatively to us” thus: “This does not mean that a man is the only or best judge of what is best for him to do, but that what is best for him to do depends on his circumstances, powers, etc.” While Ackrill’s negative point is correct, his gloss shows that he takes “relative to us” to mean “different for different agents,” which I deny.

I have not found any commentator on the NE who explicitly reads the phrase “*meson pros hêmas*” and the Milo example the way I propose. But see n. 19 for a reference to M. Woods’ comment on the corresponding EE passage. S. Leighton (n. 3) writes that M. Nussbaum in “Non-relative Virtues, an Aristotelian Approach,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1988 “presents a version of species-relativism.” She does not, as far as I can see, discuss the phrase “relative to us,” but perhaps my interpretation of it would be welcome to her.

the mean for the former is different, more demanding, than for the beginner.”¹³ I reply that while the premises are true and would be granted by Aristotle, the conclusion is false, for he is discussing *excellence of character*, not: doing the best you can given the stage you are at. Quite simply, a beginner lacks *arete*; excellence is not relative to how far you have progressed towards it.

b) “*The mean varies according to one's susceptibility to the passions,*” so that, perhaps, what counts as courage for timid me is different from what counts as courage for fearless you. This interpretation is argued for by Losin.¹⁴ He remarks (correctly, and following Aristotle) that our emotional constitutions provide us with a set of complicating factors, factors which make hitting the target of excellence difficult. But he goes on to say:

This, I believe, is one of the reasons why Aristotle says that particular excellences of character involve observing a mean relative to us. It is also why he says that the mean relative to us cannot be determined with arithmetic precision; where we should aim to hit the mean will vary a great deal depending on the kinds and directions of crosswinds . . .

I disagree with both of these claims. It is true that agents differ in how easy they find it to hit the mark, and in which factors they find it easy or difficult to get right, as Aristotle explains both in general terms in NE II.9, and in fascinating detail when discussing the particular virtues. Here is the general claim:

We must also examine what we ourselves drift into easily. For different people have different natural tendencies towards different goals, and we shall come to know our own tendencies from the pleasure or pain that arises in us. We must drag ourselves off in the contrary direction; for if we pull far away from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall reach the intermediate condition.
NE II.9 1109b1-7

This shows that Aristotle recognises the variations in human temperament and character which make different people liable to act differently, or, as I want to say, to go wrong in different ways. It does *not* show that he held that the mean differs for such different persons according to their different temperaments or proclivities. Moral agents may approach the destination – excellence, the mean disposition which is the source of the correct response – from different points, and some of us will have a harder time getting there than others, while yet others, because of their inappropriate susceptibility to some emotion, will be unable to make it at all; continence,

¹³ Leighton (n. 3), p. 55 argues along these lines.

¹⁴ cf. n. 3.

enkratēia, may be the most they can achieve. But none of this shows that excellence differs according to our starting-points, to our different emotional constitutions; the journey may differ for different agents but the destination is the same. This surely is the point of the metaphor of straightening bent sticks used in the above passage.

Losin's second claim, that differences in our emotional constitutions are the reason (or part of the reason) why the mean relative to us cannot be determined with arithmetical precision, is also wrong. I discuss this further in section III below; for now I remark simply that the lack of precision, in ethical virtue as in the crafts, is due to the nature of the activity in question, be it ethical activity or a craft, with its need to tailor the response to the situation taking a host of factors (including human nature) into account. But nothing Aristotle says suggests to me that the differing emotional constitutions of moral agents is one such relevant factor.

c) *the mean varies according to one's station in life*, so that excellence is different for a man, a woman, a child, a slave, a ruler, a subject. Given some remarks from the *Politics*, this looks a promising suggestion. Take *Pol* I.5, 1160a20ff.

It is clear that there is excellence of character for all the above-mentioned [viz. ruler, ruled, male, female, child, slave], and temperance is not the same for a man as it is for a woman, nor is bravery or justice, as Socrates thought,¹⁵ but the one bravery is of a commanding sort, the other of a subordinate kind; and the same in the other excellences.... So we must hold about all these types what the poet does about women when he says "Grace for a woman lies in silence" but not for a man. And a child is incomplete, so it's clear that his excellence, too, is not reckoned in relation to himself but in relation to the adult and the one in control. And similarly the excellence of a slave is in relation to the master.

These remarks, it must be admitted, do represent a strand from Aristotle's political thinking, a strand which reappears at *Pol* III.10, where, in the context of worrying about the excellences of a ruler and a subject, and how they relate to that of a man, Aristotle remarks

A man would seem cowardly if he were no braver than a brave woman, and a woman would seem talkative if she were no more decorous (*kosmīa*) than the good man" *Pol* 1277b21-24.

Before asking if this is how we should interpret the NE's claim that excellence of character is relative to us, I want to relate this suggestion to the

¹⁵ The reference is to *Meno* 74bff. where Socrates rejects the view Meno offers (derived from Gorgias) that there is a different excellence for man, woman, child etc.,

previous one, b). Some might suggest that the principle involved in postulating different excellences for man and woman is that just considered, the idea that a woman's susceptibility to various passions is different from that of a man, requiring a different standard for *aretê*. The remark "a man would seem cowardly if he were no braver than a brave woman" might indeed suggest that. But the correct diagnosis is, I believe, different. Aristotle is appealing to a cultural norm which, in some cases, has little or nothing to do with actual or supposed variation in susceptibility to passions, as is clear from the example of propriety in speech: "a woman would seem talkative (a vice of excess) if she were no more decorous (*kosmia*: here, restrained in speaking) than a man." Women were simply expected to say less than men, (or less on certain occasions, at least), but not, presumably, because anyone thought they found it easier than men to keep quiet.¹⁶ The principle behind this sort of relativity claim is distinct from that of an alleged difference in susceptibility to feelings. It would be an interesting exercise to pursue these claims about differing excellence for man, woman, child, slave etc., since I suspect not one but several rationales are involved. (For instance, the way the slave's excellence relates to the master is very different from the way the child's excellence is related to that of an adult; being an adult is a child's *telos*, and that is the sense in which the child's *aretê* is *pros* the adult's.) But, interesting though the claims are, I do not think they are of help in elucidating the meaning of "relative to us" as used in the ethical works of the kind of mean *êthikê aretê* is.

My reason for suggesting that we should not read what is admittedly a claim made in the political works into the ethical works is this: in his political theory Aristotle is very conscious of all the different roles that go to make up a political community, and the need to harmonise and harness them all. In the Ethics, however, the emphasis is on the best kind of life, which is inevitably the life a well-born, well-off, well-brought-up and intelligent male could hope to lead; the sort of person who would attend his lectures, indeed. Though well aware that man is *politikon*, the Ethics nonetheless focusses on the individual, and the best life for such a human being (which indeed is the best life for a human being *tout court*). In short, though I concede that Aristotle does hold, in the *Politics*, that excellence

and insists that excellence is one, that all are excellent by the same qualities, such as justice, temperance etc.

¹⁶ K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, p. 100 sums up the popular view of woman-kind: "and she was a chatterbox (Ar. *Eccl.* 120)."

(and therefore in a sense the mean) varies according to your station in life, I believe that this is not a concern of his in the ethical works, and certainly is not what he has in mind when saying that excellence of character aims at a “mean relative to us.”

d) *the mean varies according to an individual's beliefs.* One version of this we can reject straightaway, a suggestion that Aristotle might have held that if A thinks the best way to feel and act in a given situation is thus and so, while B thinks otherwise, then the best way for A, the mean for A, is to act thus and so, but it is otherwise for B. Aristotle has no truck with subjectivism, which is what making the mean relative to beliefs of this kind would amount to. But what about a subtler way of making the mean relative to an agent's beliefs? If A mistakenly believes the man approaching to be a robber, while B recognises him as a friend, then – it may be suggested – the right thing for A to feel and do in that situation is different from that for B.

I reply that while this *may* be correct, it is not relevant to that mean which *ēthikē aretē* consists in achieving. For one who acts with such a mistaken belief does not act *hekōn*, intentionally, (NE III 1), so is not a candidate for manifesting *ēthikē aretē* in the first place. So the mean which *ēthikē aretē* involves is not relative to the agent's beliefs, whether these beliefs are about the good, or about the facts of the situation.

I don't want to deny that there *are* characteristics of the agent relevant to what the excellent response in a given situation will be. To adapt an example from NE IX 2, if A is approached by B for a loan, the correct response will depend in large part on whether B formerly lent A money or did A some other service. Again, if A sees B insulting C, the appropriate response will depend in part on whether A, B and C are related or complete strangers. And obviously whether your conduct counts as generous depends on how wealthy you are; as Aristotle says, generosity (*to eleutherion*) depends on the state of the giver, but this is immediately glossed as: it is in accordance with one's wealth (NE 1120b6-9). Such facts about agents are indeed relevant, but I suggest it is far more helpful to regard them as parts of the different situations which merit different responses. To repeat: the mean is not relative to agents over and above being relative to situations. And, as I show next, no claim about agent-relativity is made either in the phrase “relative to us” or in the Milo example.

III

The passage quoted at the head of I continues, again in Irwin's translation (adapted):¹⁷

If, e.g., ten are many and two are few, one takes six as intermediate in the object, since it exceeds [two] and is exceeded [by ten] by an equal amount, [four]; this is what is intermediate by numerical proportion. But that is not how the intermediate that is relative to us should be taken. For if, e.g., ten pounds [of food] are a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, *it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six*, since this might be either a little or a lot for the person who is to take it – for Milo a little, but for the beginner in gymnastics a lot; and the same is true for running and wrestling. *In this way every scientific expert avoids excess and deficiency and seeks and chooses what is intermediate – but relative to us, not in the object.* (1106a33-b7)

Twice, in the lines I have italicised, Aristotle makes clear the point of the example. The trainer aims at a normative *meson*, which will vary from case to case, not at a fixed midpoint. This is generalised at 1106b5 “every scientific expert seeks and chooses the *meson* relative to us.” The application to *êthikê aretê* comes a few lines later, in the claim that virtue too aims at what is *meson* (sc, in the same way). It is clear, on a careful reading, that it is the trainer, (and indeed all experts who seek the *meson*), who is compared to the moral agent, not Milo and the novice. They represent rather the objects on which the skill is to be practised – be it gymnastic training, medicine or housebuilding, the situations which call for skill and judgement to avoid excess and defect.¹⁸ And when *êthikê aretê* is compared to these, we have no more reason to think that the appropriate action varies with the moral agent than the appropriate diet with the trainer or the correct medical treatment with the doctor. Of course an

¹⁷ I have used “one takes” for *lambanousi* in a34 (literally, they take; Irwin: we take), and “should be taken” for *lēpeion* in a36 (where Irwin has “we must take”).

¹⁸ But I am not suggesting instead that “relative to us” means “relative to us as recipients of moral action,” thus preserving the idea that Milo and the beginner represent the different individuals labelled “us.” Aspasius’ comment here might suggest that he read the passage this way (Aspasius in *Eth. Nicom.*, p. 47 Heylbut). Recognising that the focus is on the possessor of a skill, he explains “relative to us” as “appropriate to each” (*pros hekaston oikeion*) and illustrates with the cobbler, who “does not think one shoe-size *meson*, but in relation to me the shoe which fits my foot, in relation to you the one which fits yours.” (Aquinas uses the same illustration.) He does not make the link with virtue, but if he were to press this analogy the several persons to whom the *meson* is appropriate would be the recipients of moral action. Though the thesis thus ascribed to Aristotle is one he accepts, I claim that “relative to us as recipients of moral action” is no more what he means by the phrase “relative to us” than the traditional interpretation “relative to us as moral agents.”

unskilled practitioner should not attempt tricky surgery, but to refrain is not to exercise the skill of the surgeon. To labour the point, the best diet will vary according to the recipient, to the physique required and the purpose for which it is required, but it should not vary according to the dietician.

This reading is confirmed by the corresponding passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1220b21-30). There the contrast between the two kinds of *meson* is repeated (though here the phrase “relative to each other” *pros allēla* replaces “in the object” of the NE). The “mean relative to us” is likened to that sought by a variety of skills (gymnastics, medicine, house-building, helmsmanship) and, Aristotle explains, “in all things the mean relative to us is best, for this is as knowledge and a rational principle (*logos*) prescribe.” Michael Woods perceptively comments *ad loc.*¹⁹ “The second mean involves an evaluative element, since it refers to what is intermediate between excess and defect, i.e. what avoids too much and too little, and therefore cannot be determined without reference to human needs and purposes, – hence the phrase ‘relative to us.’” It is noteworthy that the remark from the NE which has caused misunderstanding, the contrast between what is and what is not “one and the same for all,” is absent from the EE account of the “mean relative to us”; this latter focusses on precisely the elements I believe should be seen as central: that the mean relative to us is *best*, and that it is *as knowledge and a rational principle prescribe*.

Further confirmation that “relative to us” means “relative to human beings” comes from considering other contexts where by “us” Aristotle means “human beings.” Thus, in the NE, excellence *hyper hēmas*, “beyond us” is heroic or divine excellence.²⁰ In discussing proper objects of fear Aristotle states that some degrees of heat and cold are “beyond us and the states of the human body” while in the *Physics* and *de Caelo* “relative to us” regularly means “relative to the human viewpoint.”²¹ While there are

¹⁹ M. Woods, *Aristotle's Eudemian Ethics, I, II and VII*, Clarendon Aristotle Series, p. 112.

²⁰ NE 1145a19. Note also NE 1113b5-19, where the claim that virtue and vice are *eph' hēmin* (“up to us”) is linked with the claim that man (*ho anthrōpos*) is the beginning and the begetter of actions: another example where by “us” Aristotle means us as human beings, not us as individuals.

²¹ EE 1229b18-21; *Phys* 205b34, 208b14, 212a22; *de Caelo* 285a2. Note also the familiar distinction (e.g. at *Phys* 184a16, *An Pr* 68b35, *An Po* 71b33-4) between what is more knowable for us/in relation to us (*gnōrimōteron hēmin/pros hēmas*) and what is more knowable by nature; the former, which is often equated with what is more knowable in accordance with perception, is clearly relative to human beings, not to individuals.

many examples of “relative to us” meaning “relative to human beings,” and likewise for “beyond us,” there is no example (apart from that in the NE, where I dispute the interpretation) which could plausibly be interpreted as “relative to us as different individuals.” Indeed Aristotle has a different way of saying relative to the individual, *pros tina*. In *Soph El* he says that a sophistical refutation is not a refutation *simpliciter*, but *pros tina*; cashed as, relative to the person being asked the questions.²²

I have argued that it is crucial to pay due attention to the fact that in the key passage Aristotle is comparing the practitioner of *ēthikē aretē* to the possessors of skills. But there is a problem here. How wide does Aristotle intend to cast his net when he claims (1106b5) “in this way every scientific expert avoids excess and deficiency and seeks and chooses the *meson*, not that in the object but that relative to us,” continuing in the next sentence to say that every *epistêmê* (science) looks to the *meson*? Having just distinguished the numerical *meson* from the *meson* relative to us, he can hardly be meaning to say that every science seeks the second and not the first, since presumably the various mathematical sciences seek the first.²³ The illustrations he uses are (in NE) the skill of the trainer, and crafts in general which aim for what is just right in their products, *erga*; in the EE we have gymnastics, medicine, building and navigation. I suspect that despite speaking of “every scientific expert” and “every science,” Aristotle would not wish to include those sciences properly so-called which investigate invariable truths as their subject.²⁴ For he is interested, I think, in kinds of expertise which share the following features: they have as their aim something related to human nature, needs, purposes and/or interests, and in the pursuit of that aim they do not operate with complete precision and an agreed decision procedure, but require experience and judgement in the application of any principles. Though Aristotle is often

²² *Soph El* 170a14-19.

²³ It is also unfortunate that he follows the claim that seeking the mean is a universal and worthy task with the remark that finding the *meson* of a circle is not for anyone but for the expert (*ou pantos alla tou eidotos*) NE 1109a25. Not only is the *meson* here the wrong one (the *meson* in the object, one and the same), but the technique of finding it is scarcely rare or difficult to acquire.

²⁴ What is needed here is exactly that distinction drawn in the famous passage of Plato's *Politicus*, 284c-e, cf. 286c-d, which Aristotle's discussion so strongly recalls. Having distinguished the two kinds of measurement, the second of which involves a norm, Plato divides skills into those which measure length, number etc., and those which are concerned with “the appropriate (*metrion*), the fitting (*prepon*), the right time (*kairon*), the necessary (*deon*) and whatever avoids the extremes for the *meson*” – *technai* such as weaving, statesmanship etc. no doubt.

at pains to say how *ēthikē aretē* differs from skills or crafts, (*technai*),²⁵ his remarks about the way in which it aims at a “mean relative to us” focus instead on the parallels between *ēthikē aretē* and certain crafts or skills. By paying due attention to his remarks we note the emphasis on a goal relating to human beings, a goal the realisation of which involves different action in different situations, which in turn requires a certain skill and judgement, avoiding too much and too little, but getting it just right. Nothing Aristotle says commits him to the mean being relative to individual agents; had he foreseen how his Milo example was to be misread as advocating this, he might have substituted an example drawn from the exercising of horses or from the number and size of sails appropriate for different types of ship.

Conclusion

Two questions must be distinguished:

- (1) Does Aristotle’s claim that *ēthikē aretē* involves a “mean relative to us” amount to the claim that it is relative to individual moral agents?
- (2) Is it compatible with Aristotle’s ethical theory (or even required by it) that *ēthikē aretē* is relative to individual moral agents?

Those who answer (1) “yes” – and this includes the scholars cited earlier²⁶ – must do the same for (2). My primary aim has been to argue for

²⁵ E.g. at 1105a34-b9, 1140b22-25; in the first the point is that to manifest an *ēthikē aretē* more is required than to manifest a skill, since for the former one must choose the action for its own sake etc. In the second the point is that with skills, but not with *ēthikē aretē* or *phronēsis*, to go wrong intentionally is preferable to doing so unintentionally. But these important points cannot be appealed to in an attempt to spell out how *ēthikē aretē* might be relative to individual agents, since any account of “relative to us” must apply equally to the *technai*.

²⁶ Notes 2, 3 and 12. If we label “traditionalist” all who adopt the traditional understanding of “relative to us” as “relative to us as individual moral agents,” they may be divided into two groups. “Bold” traditionalists, who would include Joachim (n. 12), Leighton and Losin (n. 3), find Aristotle advocating a bold agent-relativity; my section II (especially a) and b)) argues that Aristotle could not accept and is not arguing for such versions of agent-relativity. The cautious, such as Ackrill (n. 12), Hardie and Kraut (n. 2), agree in adopting the traditional reading of *pros hēmas* but spell it out in more cautious ways, ways which may well be compatible with Aristotle’s ethical theory. These, unlike the “bold” theorists, might welcome my re-interpretation which removes any obligation to find a version, however minimal, of agent-relativity in the *Ethics*.

the answer “no” to (1). To this end section III, where I give a careful reading of the passage in question and a comparison with Aristotelian usage (of “us” and of “relative to us”) elsewhere, ought to be sufficient. But another strand in my argument against the traditional reading of *pros hēmas* (that is, for a negative answer to (1)) has been to show (in sec II) that some favoured ways of cashing the thesis that *ēthikē aretē* is relative to individual agents are untenable. Far from being required by Aristotle’s theory, most of the suggested ways are incompatible with it, since, in most scenarios, one or more of the agents should not be credited with excellence at all (for instance, the beginner on the road to excellence, or a person with undue susceptibility to some passion).

But showing that some favoured ways of cashing agent-relativity are untenable is not enough to return a negative answer to (2). Indeed I conceded, at the end of sec II, that some facts about an agent *are* considered by Aristotle to be relevant to determining the excellent response in a given situation – for instance whether or not the person now approached for a loan was formerly in the other’s debt. I suggested that such facts concerning the agent should be considered rather parts of the situation. Now it may be objected that this is a mere dodge and insufficient to establish a negative answer to (2). My reply is that I am not directly concerned to deny (2); however, once it is accepted that Aristotle is not *claiming* that excellence is relative to the individual moral agent, the burden of proof is on those who wish to maintain that he *is committed to* some or other form of agent-relativity. For, as I have argued, once we set aside the misinterpretation of *pros hēmas*, there is little or nothing, either in the general account of *ēthikē aretē* or in the discussion of the particular excellences, to suggest that Aristotle is so committed, and much that is hard to square with many favoured versions of the thesis that excellence is relative to individual moral agents.²⁷

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See Addendum overleaf

²⁷ For helpful comments I am grateful to Roger Crisp and to members of the audience at Cornell including Terence Irwin, Todd Blanke and Jennifer Whiting.

Addendum

A further article on this subject by Stephen Leighton appeared after the above was accepted for publication ("The Mean Relative to Us" in *Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean*, edd. R. Bosley, R. Shiner and J. Sisson = *Apeiron* XXV no. 4 December 1995). As in the earlier article (see note 3), he defends the interpretation I oppose, labelling it "character relativity."

I make two, related, points:

1. Regarding "the mean relative to us" L. distinguishes two "interpretive strategies," preferring the second. On the first, "Aristotle's relativizing claim concerns (only) the choices, actions and passions of persons in the circumstances of virtuous activity," while the second takes Aristotle also to be making a point about virtuous character itself. I have no quarrel with this "second strategy" as long as it confines itself to the claim which I label 2a.

2a: virtuous character (not merely virtuous actions and passions) involves a "mean relative to us."

But L's development of the "second strategy" involves a slide from the innocuous 2a to the quite different claim:

2b: virtue is relative to our character.

(See, for instance, p. 69 where L illustrates the distinction between his two strategies by saying "it is not simply a matter of the appropriate manifestations of good temper being relative to their circumstances <L's "first strategy">, but also the mean state that is good temper in some way being relative to the agent, her or his character. We can call this character relativity." Apparently L. holds that to go beyond the first strategy is immediately to accept 2b, which he has not distinguished from 2a.) 2a is true, but does nothing for L's interpretation; 2b is L's central claim , and I find no grounds for attributing it to Aristotle, once it is distinguished from the uncontroversial 2a.

2. *Eudemian Ethics* II 3-5 Having noted (p. 72, note 10) that the phrase "mean relative to us" appears also in EE II, 3-5, L. writes "I would argue that these remarks should be read to accord with the second interpretive strategy (cf. 1222a7-12)." (L. adds that the position of the EE is not sufficiently clear to help with interpreting the NE.) The relevant passage runs as follows; it contains a textual crux:

Since virtue has been taken to be the state which makes people doers of what is best, and through which men are best disposed in regard to what is best, and the best is that which is in accord with the right principle (*tò κατὰ τὸν ὄρθον λόγον*), this being the mean between excess and deficiency relative to us, ἀναγκαῖον ἀνεῖη τὴν ἡθικὴν ἀρετὴν καθ' [αὐτὸν] ἔκαστον μεσότητα εἶναι καὶ (codd. ἥ) περὶ μέσον ἄπτα. . . (EE 1222a7-12).

L does not give his reading, nor explain how these lines help his case. Perhaps he cites them simply to support what I have labelled 2a (since after referring to the mean relative to us, Aristotle calls virtue itself a *mesotes*); if so, this is fair enough, but in itself it gives no support to 2b. But perhaps he takes them to support 2b, believing them to contain a reference to a “mean relative to oneself”, as does the author of another article in the same volume, George N. Terzis, “Homoeostasis and the Mean in Aristotle's Ethics,” p. 176, who cites this passage when writing of “Aristotle's doctrine of the ‘mean relative to oneself’ (*mesotes kath'hauton hekaston*, EE 1222a).” But whatever the correct reading, this interpretation (“mean relative to oneself”) is implausible. Most editors have emended the mss καθ' αὐτὸν ἔκαστον, either by deleting αὐτὸν (Spengel, followed by Mingay OCT) or by reading καθ' αὐτὴν ἔκάστην (Ross and Walzer, followed by M.J. Woods in his translation and commentary). Even if one keeps the problematic mss reading (as Terzis apparently does), it can scarcely (with *kata*, not *pros*) mean “relative to oneself.” These lines, then, do not support L's interpretation of “the mean relative to us” in terms of what he calls character relativity, i.e. relativity to an individual's character.

I argued above (section III) that the EE's primary discussion of the “mean relative to us” (EE II,3 1220b21-28) supports my interpretation of the phrase. Since the passage cited by L. explicitly recalls that earlier discussion, and focuses, like it, on the point that the “mean relative to us” is what is best, and what is in accordance with the *orthos logos*, it too favours the interpretation that “the mean relative to us” invokes a normative notion, the norm in question being related (not to individual agents and their characters but) to human nature, needs and/or purposes.

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